

LITERATURE

Cola Debrot, the unknown

A plea for re-publication

by Wim Rutgers



With the death of Cola Debrot the Netherlands Antilles within only one year lost their third great figure. At the end of 1980 we were shocked by the fatal accident that occurred to Dr. Chris Engels (Luc Tournier), who could rightly be considered an important bridge between Curaçao and the Netherlands. Six months after that died the great author Pierre Lauffer, who used to write in Papiamentu and who with his volume *Patria* (Fatherland) of 1947 and his later work did pioneering work in raising Papiamentu to the literary level. And now another great pioneer, Cola Debrot, died at an advanced age in the Dutch Laren on December 2, 1981.

Debrot was a great man because of his knowledge, as is witnessed among other things by the two scientific studies he completed; the functions he exercised, of which I will only mention the governorship and not in the last place because of his cosmopolitan broadmindedness. He had travelled a lot and spoke many languages. He was also a many-sided man, doctor of law, physician, civil servant, administrator and artist. It is in this last capacity that I want to dedicate attention to him and here again it is his versatility that stands out in the first place. Debrot was a poet, a prose-writer, a dramatist and an essay writer.

Well-known

The literary history of the Netherlands Antilles would not be as well-known as it is now were it not for his pioneering work. Debrot was the first person who tried to put in a row the facts of the course of development of Antillean literature.

He did so in a number of lectures, which were compiled into "Literatuur in de Nederlandse Antillen" (Literature in the Netherlands Antilles), a comprehensive article, which was published in "his" magazine de Antilliaanse Cahiers (the Antillean Copy-books) and later

on appeared separately in an English translation.

It was he who took it upon himself to write the title "literature" in the *Encyclopedie van de Nederlandse Antillen* (Encyclopedia of the Netherlands Antilles); he wrote the chapter "Verworvenheden en leemten van de Antilliaanse literatuur" (Achievements and lacunae of Antillean literature). In doing this he became a pioneer in the field of our literary history. The person who writes about the literature of the Netherlands Antilles cannot possibly go around Debrot, is an absolutely correct statement. Also outside the Antilles, to wit in the Netherlands, Debrot is the most well-known Antillean author, who is assured of a place in every literary survey as debutant in the magazine *Forum* and co-creator of *Criterium*.

Un-known

But in spite of all this what I want to write about in this article is "the unknown Cola Debrot". The title already used by Frank Martinus Arion more than ten years ago in his magazine *Ruku*, when he dedicated one of the numbers almost entirely to this author, who was born in Bonaire in 1902. The title had not been chosen idly and even now could be used to describe many of Debrot's works. It is with

him as with so many others, who in spite of quite an extensive body of work, are known mostly as the author of one book, whereas the rest of their work runs the risk of being forgotten. So Cola Debrot is the author of the widely read and praised *Mijn Zuster de negerin* (My sister the negro) 1934/1935), *Bewolkt bestaan* (Cloudy existence) (1948), which was admired or maligned in a limited circle, *Bid voor Camille Willocq* (Pray for Camille Willocq) (1946) and the poem *Tussen de grijze lijnen* (Between the grey lines) (1976), which has hardly been read as is mostly the case with poetry.

And yet I would not dare use the predicate unknown for this work, nor for the essayistic *Dagboekbladen uit Genève* (pages from a diary in Geneva) (1967), because they are not more unknown than many of the works of other authors. Who is acquainted with Tip Marugg's *In de straten van Tepalka* (In the streets of Tepalka) and the poetry volumes of Oda Blinder and Alette Beaujon, to name but a few?

Besides these more or less known works, however, Cola Debrot has written works that may well be considered totally unknown, because for decades they have been inaccessible.

De Mapen (The Mapes)

In general 'Mijn zuster de negerin' which was originally published in the magazine *Forum*, is considered as Debrot's debut and one forgets that in the same magazine a year before had appeared from Debrot's hand a novelette of about the same length "De Mapen", of which at the time the influential critic

Menno Ter Braak had a very favourable opinion: "Not counting some four extremely dull jokes I think it is a good satire on the Soviets with a humour that is very original". The setting of the story, which was published in 1933, is Russia in 1947, where the revolutionaries are ridding themselves of revisionist elements, among whom the scientific experimentator Jean Jacques de Brie Crozme, who wants to bridge the social contrasts with the "mapes" (a cross-breeding between men and apes). In Kristof, volume IV, no. 2, there is an analysis of the novelette, which because of its strongly ironic effect and subject — a futuristic story is hard to find in Antillean literature! — is certainly worthwhile reprinting in order to get better acquainted with Debrot's early work.

Criterion

In 1940 Debrot, together with Ed Hoornik and Han Hoekstra, created a new literary magazine called *Criterion*, which went on being published up to the moment when the German Kulturkammer made this impossible in 1942. It is generally known that in this magazine Cola Debrot defended romantic

rationalism, a school of thought named thus by him, and with which he argued against the strongly intellectualistic trend in Forum. Debrot advocated a new "criterium", which he finds in the living harmony between feeling and intellect, a realization of the contrasts in art, because they "are the mirrors of the tragic inconsistencies in man".

Allow me to quote some fragments: "The rationalist in completely acceptable form only contends that romanticism (...) has its roots in the bottom level of social life and in individual psychology (the personality); he does not say anything else than that there is a relation between the two areas. In keeping this relation clear we have the only means to protect romanticism from the flood of phrases and mad mythologies."

A little further on he adds: "In our magazine you can find all the half-hues of the contrast between romanticism and rationalism. We will only make a stand, even if expertise does inspire a certain respect, when we are grinned at by petrification". And finally; "We have only one demand: never pin yourself down."

The opening article that he wrote on this subject in *Criterion* and from which the above quotations were taken, as well as its sequel, were never published otherwise than in this magazine and consequently are inaccessible.

Ars et Vita

The same is true of the polemic volume on the same problem that he published together with the well-known Dutch literary historian Gerard Knuvelder under the title *Ars et Vita* (1946). Therein can be found Debrot's literary credo as put into words and systematically explained after the Second World War in his creative prose. Of the two articles that he printed in *Ars et Vita* the second one especially is of interest, because it is the most explicit: "Open kaart" (Open card). In that article Debrot places the "cosmic" artist's temperament opposite the "escatological" one, in which the first one has a defined conception of the world, which is

still being formed in the second one and is in a state of constant development. The latter he considers applicable to himself: "It is the irreconcilability of the variations (although in an artistic sense they form a unity) that for me has the strongest attraction". In the work of art as such contrasts that are irreconcilable in daily life become a harmonious unity. In this way the work of art is a victory over human shortcomings.

De Automaten (The automats)

Cola Debrot's play *Bokaal aan de lippen* (Beaker to the lips) (1950) has certainly through its translation into Papiamentu by May Henriquez under the title *Kelki na Boka* (1973) become somewhat better known, but the play in three acts *De automaten* (The automats), which was published in *Criterion* in 1940 in three instalments is inaccessible.

In this work the five great social "rocks", the Professor (Science), the Journalist (Press), the Tapdancer (Art), the Invalid (Heavy Labour) and the Anarchist (Revolution) are searching for the Truth. In doing this they conduct themselves in a stereotype manner, to put it briefly, like automats. Officer Verstecke, who has to execute the anarchist, disregards the order and in doing so steps out of the everyday automatism, because he realizes: "All of us here are chilly persons. We repeat what others say, but we ourselves hide behind the stove; we do not try anything ourselves.". He arrived at these thoughts when he woke one night beside his wife, who "was jerking her legs, uttering small cries": I broke out in a sweat of anxiety mixed with headache. With horror I realized that we are merely automats. This woman who was jerking her legs and I who at one time or another had shot at anarchists..." Naturally the insubordination becomes the officers's ruin, although a lynching party originally planned, in which he was to be killed by bludgeoning, is called off. His downfall is brought about by his Follower, who is always inclined to kill his predecessor. The latter, ▶





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together with the Swindler and the hysterical Myra van Kamme finally come off best. The play ends with the cries: "Long live the Follower! Long live Myra! Long live the Swindler! Yes, long live the Swindler! Long live the Automats!" The automatism that for a moment had been disturbed by the officer has fortunately been restored. This is the truth ironically conveyed by mouth of the Professor: "An important truth must go through the Follower, so that everything may remain as of old".

Existantialism

Critics wrote about the existentialistic influence in *Bid voor Camille Willocq* and *Bewolkt bestaan*, but who knows anything about the introduction given by Debrot on Existentialism as early as 1947, which was published in *De Stoep* (The Porch) of September 1948 and which together with a few other lectures by others was already published in 1947 by Leopold's Publishing Company under the title

"Het existentialisme; drie voordrachten met discussie" (Existentialism, three lectures with discussions)? Perhaps a story like "De spijker" (The nail), which appeared in the *Antilliaanse Cahiers*, may be known, but who has ever heard of "Marina" (*Criterium*, 1940), the story about the Parisian correspondent Nicolas Broque to whom Marina, his friend, talks about a dream in a letter, which ends as follows: "But do think about this one thing; have you really lost the capacity to attain happiness? To be completely honest: I haven't. Isn't there a winding road between the Dutch birches, which you so often remember with great melancholy? Keep your heart up. Drive the despair out of your thoughts."

Republication

Besides the works mentioned above numerous articles have been published, criticisms, prose fragments and poems in *Criterium*, *De Gids* (The Guide), *Centaur* and

other magazines. It is true that the greater part of this work has a strongly European character and is little Antillean-oriented and that with them Debrot belongs more to the Dutch than to the Antillean literature. But they are also part of his authorship; he has influenced literary life both in his mother country and in his fatherland.

If one wishes to honour Cola Debrot as an author and really appraise his value, it would be an absolute must to arrive at an integral publication of all his issued writings.

A future Antillean publishing firm that would take it upon itself to carry out this work would merely by this do our country a great service. It would also do the cultural entities great honour if they would provide the necessary funds to make this work possible. ■

(translated from Dutch)